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Has Reagan protected the KGB?

President Reagan has made a career out of denouncing the evil imperialism of the Soviet Union, but he is about to be embarrassed by a serious charge that his administration has mollycoddled the Russians on the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981.

Claire Sterling, author of "The Terror Network," has written a sequel to this exhaustive, respected study of international terrorism. Her new work, "The Time of the Assassins," scheduled for release on Jan. 4, accuses the Reagan administration, the CIA, and several other Western governments of deliberate deception concerning the link between the would-be assassin and the secret services of Bulgaria and the Soviet Union.

The emphasis should be placed on *deliberate*. Much has been written about the tendency for individuals and societies to avoid facing up to ugly facts which require concerted action; the denial of Western govern-

ments to face up to evidence that Hitler was exterminating Jews in concentration camps is a textbook case of what has been termed, "the will not to believe."

But Ms. Sterling's investigation of government conduct in the wake of the 1981 assassination attempt points

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An Opinion



to something much more disturbing, if her information and interpretation are correct. According to Ms. Sterling (from an excerpt of her book, published last week in *The Wall Street Journal*):

"The (assassination) operation was evidently planned to simulate the kind of mindless terrorism hit that has gradually been accorded a kind of numbed acceptance, a hit

designed not so much to eliminate the victim as to frighten the audience. In this instance, however, the purpose was not to frighten the audience but to eliminate the victim. It was no terrorist hit at all."

"The setting was an elaborate ruse. The assassin had been hired, and paid. He had no passionate ideological commitments, nor did his employers, who were simply agents of a foreign state. Would Western governments — whatever their past performance — help to keep a secret of such magnitude?"

"They would — and did."

According to the writer, the U.S., Britain, West Germany and Israel mocked and derided the investigation attempts by the Italian judge assigned the case. Neither the U.S. intelligence agencies nor American embassies have given the Bulgarian-KGB connection any investigative priority. Indeed, Ms. Sterling accuses the Reagan administration of withholding evidence in its possession which bolstered the argument that the assassin was abetted by Bulgarian agents.

Both William Clark, then-presidential national security assistant, and CIA Director William Casey — considered to share Mr. Reagan's hard-line, anti-Soviet viewpoints — have reportedly scoffed at the Bulgarian-KGB connection.

Instead of helping the diligent Italian prosecutors in their struggle to glean hard evidence on the assassination attempt, why has the West — particularly the Reagan administration — seemingly impeded the investigation and added to the public confusion over the incident?

If the Sterling book's charges are true, they raise a mind-boggling question: Why has Mr. Reagan allowed the U.S., in effect, to help the Bulgarians and the Russians avoid being nabbed for the plot to murder the pope?